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Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: 'Riot is language of the unheard'

James Brown, RFK calmed Boston, Indianapolis in 1968

By Rob Burgess
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It was the evening of April 4, 1968, and New York Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was in the midst of his campaign to secure the Democratic nomination for president. He was standing on the back of a flatbed truck on the corner of 17th and Broadway streets in Indianapolis. He had some disturbing news to announce to the throng of around 2,500 supporters.

“Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee,” he told the crowd, who immediately whooped and shouted in disbelief and horror.

Earlier that night, Kennedy was told he shouldn’t even be there. In fact, he had been advised his own life might be in peril if he spoke.

“Indianapolis Mayor Richard Lugar, fearing a race riot, told Kennedy’s staff that his police could not guarantee Kennedy’s safety,” reported Will Higgins of The Indianapolis Star on April 2. “Racial violence indeed would later sweep the country, with riots in more than 100 cities, 39 people killed and more than 2,000 injured.”

But not in Indianapolis. Kennedy’s heartfelt words and message of empathy touched the grieving Indy populace. As cities across the nation sustained the worst riots in a century, the Circle City remained comparatively calm in mourning.

“What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but ... love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black,” said Kennedy, in his short speech.

The next night, James Brown was scheduled to play Boston Garden. The concert almost didn't happen as the same violence that had plagued other cities had erupted in Boston the night before. With the help of Mayor Kevin White, though, Brown was not only persuaded to continue with the show, but also to allow it to be broadcast on public television station WGBH. This decision proved wise, as Boston — like Indianapolis — was quiet that night.

"Now I asked the police to step back, because I figured I can get some respect from my own people," said Brown, as he pleaded with audience members who had rushed the stage. "Don't make sense. Now, are we together, or ain't we?"

"Yeah!" replied the crowd.

Compare those words to those the residents of Baltimore have been treated to by their leaders — both in 1968 and now — as riots have once again raged in the wake of the death last month of 24-year-old Freddie Gray while in police custody:

- "I publicly repudiate, condemn, and reject all white racists. I call upon you to publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all black racists. This, so far, you have not been willing to do." — Republican Maryland Gov. Spiro Agnew at a conference with civil rights and community leaders April 11, 1968, at the State Office Building in Baltimore.

- “It is very clear there is a difference between what we saw over the past week with the peaceful protests, those who wish to seek justice, those who wish to be heard and want answers, and the difference between those protests and the thugs who only want to incite violence and destroy our city.” — Democratic Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake during an April 27 press conference.

- “My understanding is, is you’ve got some of the same organizers now going back into these communities to try to clean up in the aftermath of a handful of criminals and thugs who tore up the place.” — President Barack Obama during an April 28 press conference at The White House Rose Garden.

Both then and now Baltimore burned because leaders refused to follow the example set by Kennedy and Brown. When you talk at people instead of to them, you make it clear you’re not interested in listening to them. A month before his death, King delivered a speech March 14, 1968, at Grosse Pointe High School in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, which perfectly described this dichotomy.

“A riot is the language of the unheard,” he said.

America, are you listening, or are you just talking?

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